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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10974-008-9163-8>

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ZORA URL: <https://doi.org/10.5167/uzh-156585>

Journal Article

Published Version

Originally published at:

Schaub, Marcus C (2008). Footsteps of the European Society for Muscle Research (1971–2008). *Journal of muscle research and cell motility*, 29(6-8):151-154.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10974-008-9163-8>

Footsteps of the European society for muscle research (1971–2008)

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Received: 21 November 2008 / Accepted: 19 December 2008 / Published online: 20 January 2009
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Back from the splendid XXXVIIth European Muscle Conference (EMC) 2008 held in Oxford at the beautiful Keble College (organised by Steven Marston and Charles Redwood), it may be appropriate to look back for a moment to the beginnings of this annual institution. This implies that before 2008 there were held another 36 Muscle Meetings (Table 1), and this reaches well back into the pre-computer era, an era where the history meets the misty dawn of the EMC. Originally, EMC meant “European Muscle Club” which was born in 1971. Misty it is because the records may be laden with gaps here and there as in the pre-computer era not everything was filed away in black and white on paper. At this year’s meeting in Oxford, as often at earlier meetings as well, a fair amount of young scientists, new to the scene, have appeared, and this makes these meetings so charming and interesting.

Returning back to Zurich in 1970 from a three and half years postdoc with Sam V. Perry in Birmingham working on the isolation of the troponin components, I felt a bit lost in the Continental muscle field. At that time Britain was for decades a stronghold in muscle research (see Gerald Elliott’s contribution in this issue), and Sam Perry took me occasionally along to the rather loose organisation known as the Muscle Dining Club. It was immediately clear that something analogous on the Continent would not work with scientists coming from the Northern, Southern, and Eastern European countries (and perhaps even from Britain) just for an informal Muscle Evening Dinner. So after contacting a few friends including Caspar Rüegg

(Heidelberg), Jean Léger (Paris), and late Gabriel Hamoir (Liège) we founded the European Muscle Club aiming at bringing muscle researchers together on the European Continent, exchanging ideas, and holding annual meetings every year in another European country. The Club should be open not only for the established researchers but also for young and new people in the field.

The first meeting was organised by late Gabriel Hamoir in Liège (Belgium) with 47 attendees. As summarised in Table 1, the attendance gradually increased over the years, fluctuating between 200 and 300 (which is an ideal size for specialised scientific meetings) since the 1980s. A memorable discussion took place at the very first meeting in Liège which I won’t keep hidden. In search for a name “Continental Muscle Club” was favoured over “European Muscle Club”. To be frank, first, we were not sure whether the British would think it worth to cross the Channel for joining us in future meetings, and second, some Continentals were afraid to become overpowered and dominated by the British stronghold in muscle research. Fortunately, the unifying term “European” won out and more and more British muscle researchers used to participate in the EMC meetings. It may be said without scruples that the EMC was instrumental in bringing muscle researchers from different laboratories and different European countries together and was thus helping to induce cooperations. Over the years the scientific quality of the meetings has significantly improved. One wonders whether the improved scientific standard began to attract the British muscle scientists to join the meetings, or whether the British contributions raised the scientific standard on the Continent. It does look, however, as if both sides would have contributed their share. In any case, Table 1 tells us that past EMC meetings have already four times taken place in Britain.

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Table 1 Past European muscle conferences with organisers and approximate numbers of participants in the last column

1972	Liège	Belgium	Gabriel Hamoir	47
1973	Lenzburg	Switzerland	Marcus Schaub	68
1974	Budapest	Hungary	Endre Biro	80
1975	Aarhus	Denmark	Jack Lowy	120
1976	Bressanone	Italy	Alfredo Margreth	160
1977	Saclay/Paris	France	Ingrid Pinset-Härström	110
1978	Warszawa	Poland	Witek Drabikowski	120
1979	Heidelberg	Germany	Caspar Rüegg	220
1980	Salzburg	Austria	Vic Small	235
1981	Galway	Ireland	D. R. Headon	110
1982	Leicester	UK	Arthur Rowe/Clive Bagshaw	210
1983	Szeged	Hungary	Ferenc Guba/Ödön Takacs	180
1984	Gwatt	Switzerland	Marcus Schaub	240
1985	Ulm	Germany	Reinhardt Rüdel	230
1986	Montpellier	France	Ridha Kassab	225
1987	Tiberias	Israel	Avraham Oplatka/Benny Geiger	180
1988	Abano Terme	Italy	Ugo Carraro	210
1989	Luntenen	Netherlands	Tugendhold Blangé	220
1990	Brussels	Belgium	Georges Maréchal	260
1991	Oxford	UK	Chris Ashley/Gerald Elliott	230
1992	Bielefeld	Germany	Harald Jockusch/Horst Hinssen	270
1993	Gwatt	Switzerland	Marcus Schaub	235
1994	Bochum	Germany	Ludwig Heilmeyer	220
1995	Firenze	Italy	Colomo/Cecchi/Poggesi	300
1996	Montpellier	France	Tom Barman/Franc Travers	240
1997	Hannover	Germany	Bernhard Brenner	190
1998	Lund	Sweden	Anders Arner/Per Hellstrand	226
1999	York	UK	John Sparrow/Justin Molloy	216
2000	Berlin	Germany	Ingo Morano	195
2001	Pavia	Italy	Roberto Bottinelli/Carlo Reggiani	250
2002	Luntenen	Netherlands	Ger Stienen	180
2003	Montpellier	France	Patrick Chaussepied/Michel Pucéat	340
2004	Isola d'Elba	Italy	Vincenzo Lombardi	270
2005	Debrecen	Hungary	Istvan Jona	170
2006	Heidelberg	Germany	Rainer Fink	220
2007	Stockholm	Sweden	Anders Arner/Lars Larsson	240
2008	Oxford	UK	Steven Marston/Charles Redwood	230

I was leading the EMC with the help of a Committee of 6 to 8 members from 1971 up to 1995 when Ger Stienen from Amsterdam took over, and almost 10 years later Anders Arner from Stockholm started the present period. We repeatedly asked the members whether we should more formalise the society, but the vast majority wanted to keep it as informal as it was. Nevertheless, a number of things have changed since its beginnings. The further development of the EMC may be visualised by a shortcut of the logo in Fig. 1: white/black/white mutates into colourful red/blue/yellow and reverts back to Oxford blue/white/blue contrasting with the original black and white pattern. I

designed this logo in the late 1970s which was used for all meetings ever since. In 2002 with the meeting in Luntenen (The Netherlands) Ger Stienen rejuvenated it by adding the colours, and on the Oxford-2008 abstract book it again



Fig. 1 Changing appearance of the EMC logo originally standing for “European Muscle Club” and since the “Club” has mutated to “European Society for Muscle Research”, it stands for “European Muscle Conference”

shines in decent blue and white. In the near future the now chairman Anders Arner together with the committee will probably propose statutes to formalise the Society as a non-profit organisation in order to better regulate and secure the financial side. At present the Society membership is free, but between 10 and 20 EURO from each personal meeting registration costs are transferred to the chairman's account to aliment secretarial expenses. Some of this money also allows for travel support of young scientists to come to the meetings. At the time when the Iron Curtain was still in operation, the EMC invited and supported the attendance of muscle scientists from Eastern European countries (including Ukraine and former Soviet Union).

How come the “Club” has changed its name to “European Society for Muscle Research”? With the advent of the “Journal of Muscle Research and Cell Motility” (JMRCM) starting in 1980 (see Richard Tregear's contribution in this issue) in which the yearly meeting abstracts were now officially published, the Club gained some wider international visibility and started to attract participants from all over the world. By that time, the term “Club” became a little disreputed; I was repeatedly asked by the bank with the EMC account what kind of body building club am I managing. Actually, at the EMC 1985 in Ulm (Germany) the organiser Reinhardt Rüdel invited a group of professional body builders (men and women) who presented a breathtaking performance in applied myology. However, times changed and it got more and more difficult to raise financial support from National Science Foundations and other grant-giving organisations for the “Club Meetings”. Finally, 1988 at the meeting of Ugo Carraro (Padova) in Abano Terme the name “European Society for Muscle Research” (ESMR) was adopted. The term EMC (short for European Muscle Conference) was kept with its logo as label for the yearly meetings.

Another pleasing aspect of the EMC-ESMR arises from its fertility: there are three children. The first descendant was 1976 the “Club Francophone du Muscle” mainly comprising the French speaking muscle scientists in France, Belgium, and Switzerland. The purpose was to hold yearly meetings, in addition to the EMC, consequently using only French (English was forbidden) in order to feel at ease in talking and discussing together. I believe this custom was after a few years silently dying out. The second descendant was the “European Cytoskeletal Club”. The meeting program got overloaded by the cytoskeletal field which started growing rapidly in the 1970s. In order to avoid parallel sessions at the meetings the Cytoskeletal Club started its own meeting schedule in 1981 in Nyon (Switzerland) organised by Giulio Gabbiani (Geneva). The original idea was to occasionally hold common meetings of both Clubs together. One such common meeting was organised by Avraham Oplatka and Benny Geiger 1987 in

Tiberias (Israel), and by Marcus Schaub 1993 in Gwatt (Switzerland). Facing similar problems as our EMC, the “European Cytoskeletal Club” mutated 1990 to the more respectable “European Cytoskeletal Forum” known since then by its acronym ECF.

The third descendant is the “Alternative Muscle Club” (AMC) founded in 1981 by scientists regularly attending the EMC meetings. The AMC was holding its twenty-seventh meeting at Leeds in July 2008. The AMC meetings offer a forum for (open quotes) “PhD students and Post-docs working on muscle, cellular motility, molecular motors or associated disease states” (close quotes). To me this confession sounds rather familiar, it could as well be derived from the EMC-ESMR guidelines, and that is what makes them both so agreeable and congenial. When one gets the announcements from the AMC, hesitation for one-second, then ah yes, that's in Britain, which does not even appear in its name, of course, the independent British stronghold of muscle research is shining through.

This brings me to a last short consideration. In Europe, at least on the Continent, muscle research is eking out a somewhat meagre existence in terms of recognition and grant support. Grant applications for research on physiology, biochemistry, biophysics, cell biology, even on genetics and genomics, often meet with relegation to lower priorities if concerning (only) muscle. That is distressful in view of the massive support being granted, for instance, to research in neurobiology. Muscle is so rich and diverse in topics it offers for research. Fundamental biological paradigms have been recognised by working on muscle like metabolic pathways, tissue plasticity, genetics and disease, calcium signalling, electrophysiology, structure–function relations, etc.; moreover, muscle presents the most promising source for interdisciplinary approaches. This requires intensive cooperation between muscle researchers, and this unfortunately is not always well accepted. As opposed to neurobiology, diabetes, or cardiology, where researchers form coherent scientific communities powerful in pursuing their interests, muscle scientists appear more loosely organised and are disseminated in small groups often affiliated to institutions one would not expect them. Can that be improved? The EMC-ESMR together with the journal JMRCM might provide a combined platform that could and should be better exploited for muscle research in Europe. Presumably we muscle people all like the JMRCM, but seldom publish in it. Its impact factor was reeling over the past 5 years from 1.3 up to 1.7, then falling back to 0.9 and now regaining 1.7. It should climb up to over 4 to have a reasonable impact on the scientific community, let's try to aim at that mark.

With that I like to finish by thanking the ESMR committee, chairmen and all the past meeting organisers (who really did the lion's share of the work) for their

commitment and efforts over three decades as well as the editors of the JMRCM. A lot has been achieved, but we should not sit back, because a still greater challenge lies ahead. We are particularly grateful to the young muscle

scientists each year joining the EMC, thanks to them the Society is thriving. They muster our hope for the future of muscle research in Europe and beyond.